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SUBJECT: SERBIAN VOTER TURNOUT FOR PRESIDENTIAL FIRST ROUND
SURPRISINGLY HIGH

REF: BELGRADE 78

Summary

¶1. (U) Radical Party candidate Tomislav Nikolic's predictable first place showing in the first round of Serbia's presidential elections, left incumbent President Boris Tadic with less than a five-point gap to fill by the February 3 second round. To win, Tadic needs to kick his sluggish campaign into overdrive, going after the votes of the also-rans and didn't-votes. The elections also strengthened the hand of Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica. Kostunica's first-round candidate landed in third place, pulling 7.6% of the vote. Tadic will likely give Kostunica whatever he asks/exacts for his support and Kostunica will ultimately oblige. End Summary.

Tadic Trails by Less than Five Points

¶2. (SBU) Late evening on January 20, the Serbian Electoral Commission (the RIK) preliminarily called the first round of Serbia's presidential elections for Nikolic with 39.6% of all votes cast. With about 80% of the votes processed the RIK gave Nikolic 1,235,327 votes, leading Democratic Party candidate incumbent President Boris Tadic's 1,106,976 votes, a 35.5% share. The race for third ended with New Serbia's (NS) Velimir Ilic taking the spot with 7.5% or 232,715 votes, Socialist (SPS) Milutin Mrkonjic at 6% with 186,097 votes, and Liberal Democrat (LDP) Cedomir (Ceda) Jovanovic with 5.4%, 168,234 votes. Hungarian Istvan Pasztor won 2.6%, or some 80,564 votes. Final projections of the Center for Free Elections and Democracy (CeSID) anticipate Nikolic taking a total 1,610,000, Tadic 1,450,000, and Ilic 310,000. The RIK declared 1.88% of the ballots invalid.

Highs and Lows

¶3. (U) The biggest surprise of the first round was the unexpectedly high 61% turnout, the highest since 2000. In multi-ethnic, multi-confessional Vojvodina 63% of eligible voters turned out to vote. In Kosovo, 49.9% of the electorate voted. Nikolic pulled 39% in all regions of Serbia, and won 56.5% of the Kosovo ballots cast. Tadic beat Nikolic in Belgrade, taking 40.2%, and in the predominantly ethnic Muslim Sandzak region.

Doing the Math

¶3. (U) Fifth-placed Ceda Jovanovic endorsed Tadic just as CeSID announced its final projections, late on January 20. Pasztor threw his support to Tadic on January 21. With LDP, Hungarian, and DS votes, Tadic approaches round two with 43% of the vote. While SPS leadership has said they will not endorse a candidate in the second round, most of Mrkonjic's supporters are likely to vote Radical, giving Nikolic 45.4% in round two.

Kostunica: King-Maker

¶4. (SBU) Velimir Ilic announced to the press that he would decide whom to endorse in the February 3 election toward the end of January. In reality, Prime Minister Kostunica, rather than Ilic, likely controls the majority of the votes, having lent Ilic the support of his party the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS). So far, Kostunica has remained silent on the question of his support in the run-off. In a conversation on January 19, Parliament Speaker Oliver Dulic (DS) told the Ambassador that he expected Kostunica ultimately and "with a pained face" to support Tadic.

Other Unknowns

¶5. (SBU) Other unknown, but possible sources of support for Tadic could come from the 39% of the population who did not turn out for the first round, much of which was centered in South Serbia. According to press reports, voter turnout in the predominantly ethnic Albanian towns of Bujanovac and Presevo was less than 10%. Though Albanian leaders did not call on Albanians to boycott the vote, as they have attempted in prior national elections, clearly Albanian voters were not encouraged to vote. Albanian voting apathy centers around perceptions that the Tadic administration has not lived up to its promises to develop South Serbia. LDP's Jovanovic had a strong showing among ethnic Albanians in the South who would under no circumstances vote for Radicals. In addition to South Serbia, general voter apathy keeps them away from the polls. Whereas Radicals do a better job of getting their people to the polls, pro-Western voters tend to be more apathetic and disappointed in Tadic. He will have to work hard to convince people he can make a difference.

Comment

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¶5. (SBU) Tadic has a fighting chance to win the February 3 run-off. The high voter turnout and strong Radical showing in the first round signal the electorate's interest in the presidential choice and, perhaps, their eagerness for change. To broaden his base and to get more voters to the polls, Tadic will have to do better to have to convince more voters to go to the polls to vote for a future within Europe. In fact that is the message of the campaign posters going up today: "Together We will Conquer Europe." He will also have to get the DSS/NS endorsement. While previous polling suggested that a large share of DSS voters would come out for Tadic, even if asked to stay home, Tadic will still need Kostunica's endorsement. Kostunica is likely to give Tadic his grudging, not resounding endorsement, for a price -- continued reliance on Kostunica's disproportionate influence in Serbian politics. End Comment.

Munter